

Title	Problems and Tensions in the Representation of the Sapeurs, as demonstrated in the work of two twenty-first century Italian photographers
Type	Article
URL	https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/12113/
Date	2013
Citation	Kutesko, Elizabeth (2013) Problems and Tensions in the Representation of the Sapeurs, as demonstrated in the work of two twenty-first century Italian photographers. <i>Immediations: the Courtauld Institute of Art Journal of Postgraduate Research</i> , 3 (2). pp. 60-76.
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The Courtauld Institute of Art Journal of Postgraduate Research

VOL. 3 NO. 2 2013 ISSN 1742-7444



Fig. 1. Danielle Tamagni, selected image from *The Gentlemen of Baongo*, 2009. Colour photograph. (Photograph: Courtesy of Daniele Tamagni).





Problems and Tensions in the Representation of the *Sapeurs*, as Demonstrated in the Work of Two Twenty-first Century Italian Photographers

ELIZABETH KUTESKO

La Sape (Society for Ambieners and Persons of Elegance) and *Sapeurs*, from the word *se saper*, meaning to dress elegantly, is a cultural phenomenon in which lower class young men with limited economic prospects from Brazzaville (capital of the Republic of Congo) and Kinshasa (capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo) fashion their identities in Congolese society through the adoption of Western designer labels.¹ The neologisms *La Sape* and *Sapeurs* were coined in the early twenty-first century by Congolese diasporic youth living in Western metropolises, predominantly Paris and Brussels.² In the twenty-first century, it involves a compulsory trip to Europe called *l'aventure*, in which the *Sapeur* devotes his time to the acquisition of *le gamme*, a wardrobe of *le griffe*, clothing and accessories produced by famous fashion designers, that he ritually displays at organised parties and dance bars on returning home.³

Commentators such as Jonathan Friedman, Didier Gondola, Justin-Daniel Guandoulou, Phyllis M. Martin, and Dominic Thomas have pointed out the complexities in the *Sapeurs'* experimentation with imported Western clothes, but a more nuanced understanding is reached by drawing upon Cuban anthropologist Federico Ortiz's

I would like to thank Francesco Giusti and Danielle Tamagni for the use of their images to accompany this article and for providing me with valuable information about their work. Thank you also to Harriette, Rebecca, and Virginia for thoughtful and critical comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1. Didier Gondola, 'Sapeurs', in Joanne Eicher, ed., *Berg Encyclopaedia of Clothing and Fashion Volume 3* (Bloomsbury: London, 2011), 137–8.

2. Gondola, 'Sapeurs', 137.

3. Elizabeth L. Cameron, 'Republic of Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo', in Joanne Eicher, ed., *Berg Encyclopaedia of World Dress and Fashion Volume 1* (Bloomsbury: London, 2011), 376.





4. Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 1995), 102–3.

5. See for instance: Jonathan Friedman, 'The Political Economy of Elegance: An African Cult of Beauty', in Jonathan Friedman ed., *Consumption and Identity* (Chur: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), 167–88; Didier Gondola, 'Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth', *African Studies Review* 42: 11 (1999), 23–48; Justin-Daniel Gaundoulou, 'Dandies in Baongo', trans. Modeste Kemetia and Peter Geschiere in Peter Geschiere, Birgit Meyer, and Peter Pels, eds., *Readings on Modernity in Africa* (Oxford: James Curry, 2007), 194–205; Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); David Thomas, 'Fashion Matters: La Sape and Vestimentary Codes in transnational Contexts and Urban Diasporas', *Francophone Studies: New Landscapes, Modern Language Notes* 18 (2003), 947–73.

6. Gondola, 'Sapeurs', 137.

notion of 'transculturation'.⁴ Ortiz coined the neologism 'transculturation' in 1940 to refer to the highly varied phenomena he witnessed in many aspects of Cuban life—economic, institutional, artistic, ethical, and religious etc.—which had emerged as a result of intricate cultural transmutations throughout the history of Cuba. He selected the word 'transculturation' to replace such terms as 'acculturation' and 'deculturation', which replicated the logic of colonialism by explaining cultural contact from the perspective of the metropolis. As opposed to thinking of culture in terms of a one-sided transfer from a civilised metropolis to a primitive periphery, Ortiz drew attention to the complex process of cultural transference by which subordinated groups select and invent from materials passed on to them by a dominant culture. Although formulated with regard to a different social and historical reality, Ortiz's argument is relevant to a discussion of *La Sape*. A *Sapeur* cannot control what emanates from a dominant European culture, nor can he entirely control his representation by that culture, but he can determine, to varying extents, what he absorbs into his own culture and how he uses it for the purpose of self-fashioning and self-presentation. 'Transculturation' is not a static, deterministic state but a *continually shifting* process; meaning is not inherent in a *Sapeur's* style, but is also constructed in the contexts through which a he is represented. Representation thus emerges as a complex cultural process; a *Sapeur's* exuberant form of dress is his means of self-expression within urban Congolese society, but its close associations with the aesthetic makes this a problematic notion, particularly when viewed by a remote European audience. In examining the representation of the *Sapeurs*, this article will address some of the problems and tensions of photography that arise when the camera's lens fixes fluctuating conceptions of culture and identity, using the example of two twenty-first century Italian photographers, Francesco Giusti and Danielle Tamagni.

Whilst there has been disagreement amongst scholars as to the historical origins of *Le Sape*, most, such as Gondola and Martin, have linked the corresponding movement as it survives today to the emergence of similar cultural and sartorial trends at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵ In 1913, French Baron Jehan De Witte observed what he interpreted as 'overdressing' amongst the locals in Brazzaville: 'on Sunday, those that have several pairs of pants, several cardigans, put these clothes on one layer over the other, to flaunt their wealth. Many pride themselves on following Parisian fashion [...]'.⁶ Martin writes that in 1920's Brazzaville 'men wore suits and used accessories such as canes, monocles, gloves and pocket-watches on chains. They formed clubs around their interest in fashion, gathering to drink aperitifs and



dance to Cuban and European music played on the phonograph'.⁷ The majority of these young men who prided themselves on being unrelenting consumers and avid connoisseurs of European tailoring were domestic servants, civil servants, and musicians, spending their meagre wages to order, through catalogues, the latest fashions from Europe.⁸ Whilst the arrival of Europeans in the Congo can be seen to have greatly influenced local taste in clothes, this was not simply a breaking down of traditional African culture in favour of the adoption of half-understood elements of Western culture. Rather, as Justin-Daniel Gaundoulou has emphasized, the meeting of Western and Congolese cultures 'created a new dynamic culture which left a mark on the attitude and lifestyle of the Congolese'.⁹ A *Sapeur* can be seen to adopt and re-write European fashions in a process that may at first appear to be a practice of cultural assimilation, but on closer inspection, can be seen as an appropriation of Western goods and signs within the terms of an indigenous cultural logic. Following independence in 1960, the *Sapeurs'* style has been mobilized as a means of resistance to the authoritative structure of the Congolese state, principally in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Belgian Congo, then Zaire from 1971 to 1997), where President Mobutu Sese Seso's 'authenticity' movement of 27 October 1971 banned Western clothing styles such as the shirt, suit, and tie.¹⁰ This was an attempt to expel foreign influences that were seen as decadent, and police could arrest a person who refused to abandon European fashions in favour of traditional dress: the *abacost* (a Mao-style, short-sleeved tunic jacket in a single, sober colour) worn with trousers for men, and the *pagne* (two by six yards of untailored brightly patterned cotton fabric) and tailored camisole for women. Following Mobutu's fall from power in 1997, the *abacost* was entirely abandoned and men demonstrated their sovereignty by returning to European-style business suits or second-hand clothing in Western styles. In the Republic of Congo (formerly French Congo), the *Sapeur* movement flourished amongst the Southern Balaris as a means of opposition to the Northerners, in power since 1969, and accused by the South of lavishly consuming the country's wealth.¹¹

Gondola has referred to the twenty-first century *Sapeurs* as occupying the 'third stage of Congolese dandyism', distinguished from their early twentieth-century counterparts by a migrant impulse, which requires them to travel to Europe as part of a broader and complex process of identity formation.¹² *La Sape* in the twenty-first century is impartial and non-combatant, acting as a bridge between the two Congos and the factions involved in the civil wars that took place throughout the 1990s.¹³ Nevertheless, it is Ortiz's emphasis on the vari-

7. Martin, 'Contesting Clothes in Colonial Brazzaville', *Journal of African History* 35:3 (1994), 407.

8. Gondola, 'Sapeurs', 137.

9. Gaundoulou, 'Dandies', 194.

10. Cameron, 'Republic of Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo', 369.

11. Gondola, 'Sapeurs', 137.

12. Gondola, 'Sapeurs', 137.

13. Clare Rose, 'Book Review: Gentlemen of Baongo', *Fashion Theory* 14:3 (2011), 406.



14. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 102–3.
15. Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 5.
16. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 103.
17. Diana Taylor, 'Transculturating Transculturation', *Performing Arts Journal* 13:2 (1991), 101–2.

ety and complexity of transcultural phenomena that makes his theory particularly valuable for an investigation into the representation of *La Sape*. By addressing the subtle shifts and nuances of 'transculturation', Ortiz allows for *La Sape* to be understood as a movement which continues, in various manifestations, to exhibit a level of agency within urban Congolese society with the expression of culture, politics, and values through fashion.

To refine the term 'transculturation', it is useful to cite the definition coined by Ortiz as that which

better expresses the different phases of the transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture ... but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture ... in addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena.¹⁴

Ortiz uses the term to denominate the transformative processes undergone by a society in the acquisition of foreign cultural material. It entails both the diminishing of a society's native culture due to the imposition of foreign material, and the synthesis of the indigenous and the foreign to create a new, original cultural product. The *Sapeur* movement can be understood as a hybrid fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, and identities, which shares elements of both cultures but is also, thereby, *differentiated* from both.¹⁵ Ortiz compares the union of two cultures to the reproductive process in which 'the offspring has something of both parents but is always different from each of them'.¹⁶ Inherent within this shifting or circulating pattern of cultural transference is the agency of the indigenous culture to have an impact on the European one, even if these interactions are not strictly dialogic. Diana Taylor uses 'transculturation' in Ortiz's sense to describe a process which, rather than being overtly oppositional or *dialectical*, highlights the marginalised group's 'vitality, rather than their indebtedness to First world culture'.¹⁷ The motivations behind the *Sapeur*'s borrowings and appropriations of Western tailoring might be understood as fundamentally socio-political, rather than aesthetic, yet he utilises forms that will allow him to communicate with his specific audience, adopting the European dress codes worn in the first instance by the former colonizers, Belgium and France, in order to challenge the authoritative structures of Congolese society.

The work of two Italian photographers, Danielle Tamagni and Francesco Giusti, has documented *La Sape* in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire in the twenty-first century and illustrates some of the problems



and tensions that can arise through the representation of a *Sapeur*. Representation is a problematic area since it is inherent in *La Sape* to wish to be photographed. As Justin-Daniel Gaundoulou has emphasised:

Sometimes, he [the photographer] comes at the request of customers and sometimes on his own initiative. He is one of the keystones of the manifestation [...] The photo is the concrete proof afterwards—to be sent to whoever will want to know—that one is or has been a *Sapeur*.¹⁸

The photographer provides the tools to fix and immortalize the occasions on which the *Sapeur* shows himself off wearing prestigious Western fashion labels. There is an element of competition amongst the *Sapeurs*, and an individual will show great imagination in getting himself noticed by the photographer. However, in wanting to display himself, even if a *Sapeur* may believe he is projecting an independent vision of himself, he inevitably gives something of himself to the photographer.

Owing to the dominant position that the photographer occupies, even those with the most egalitarian intent may ultimately constitute a disempowering act in the representation of his or her subjects. Although Tamagni and Giusti did not set out to create critical ethnographic projects, Hal Foster's assertion that the current paradigmatic shift to ethnography in contemporary art remains highly problematic—since it encourages a 'pseudo-ethnography' that fails to engage the community in any real way—can still be seen as relevant to a critique of their work.¹⁹ Foster writes that even critical ethnographic projects can naturally stray 'from collaboration to self-fashioning, from a decentering of the artist as cultural authority to a remaking of the Other in neo-primitivist guise'.²⁰ This tendency to stray reveals, perhaps, less a flaw in the individual photographer's practice, than an example of the power of representation and the way the interpretation of photographs can shift depending on the discursive context in which they are viewed. The act of making a photograph automatically de-contextualises what is in front of the camera and places what is photographed into new contexts. This is not to suggest that these are always pre-meditated or calculated decisions conceived in the instance of taking a photograph, but instead that the selection and juxtaposition of such material in the subsequent editorial process necessarily involves choice, displacement, and interpretation that can disclose new meanings to a remote European audience.²¹

Whilst Tamagni's photo-essay *The Gentlemen of Baongo* (2009) is the most well-known and widely disseminated example, Giusti's lesser

18. Gaundoulou, 'Dandies', 205

19. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

20. Foster, *Return of the Real*, 197.

21. Alice Allen makes a similar point in discussing Brazilian film in 'Shifting Perspectives on Marginal Bodies and Spaces: Relationality, Power and Social Difference in Babilonia 2000 and Estamira', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 32:1 (2013), 78–93.





22. See Daniele Tamagni, *The Gentlemen of Baongo* (Great Britain: Trolley Ltd., 2009); 'Sapologie', <http://francescogiusti-photo.viewbook.com/sapologie> (Accessed: 30 July, 2013).

23. 'Francesco Giusti', <http://francescogiusti-photo.viewbook.com/about>, (Accessed: 30 July, 2013).

24. Francesco Giusti in an email to me exchanged on 31 July, 2013.

25. Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion, 1997), 160.

known work *Sapologie* (2009) is a particularly useful body of images which illuminate the elements of 'transculturation' inherent to the *Sapeur*.²² Tamagni, whose work has traversed fashion, portraiture, and documentary photography, has a background in art history and has documented African communities throughout the world, undertaking research projects that encompass religion, music, culture, fashion, and art. Freelance documentary photographer Giusti has worked in Italy, Nairobi, Cairo, Port Au Prince, and Haiti, taking photographs of groups often deemed to be on the periphery—'those who have somehow been ignored, forgotten, or outcast'—such as informal settlement dwellers, asylum seekers, and a community of transvestites in Genova, in order to investigate social realities, communities, and identity related issues.²³ Tamagni and Giusti are not the first photographers to have documented *La Sape*. Spanish documentary photographer Hector Mediavilla has been documenting the *Sapeurs* since 2003, whilst Brazzaville native Baudouin Mouanda, who currently lives in Paris, photographed the *Sapeurs* in 2008 and exhibited his work at the Biennial Exhibition of African Photography in 2009. That Tamagni and Giusti both visited in 2009 is cited by Giusti as little more than a coincidence, but a comparison of the different approaches adopted by them sheds light on the continually shifting process of 'transculturation'.²⁴

Tamagni's photographs capture the *Sapeurs* in a variety of poses, occasionally relaxed and thoughtful, but frequently dancing, tumbling, and spilling out of the frame in a carnivalesque spectacle of colour. The casual framing and composition of the subjects, rather than pointing to the inexperience of the photographer, is an intentional device that gives a sense of mobility and fluidity to the resulting photographs, suggesting that they are less constructed, and less filtered, but instead reflect the randomness of daily life in Brazzaville. The apparent artlessness of these photographs lies closer to what a European audience might identify as a 'realist' aesthetic.²⁵ Intervening within this narrative is the occasional staged image of the *Sapeurs* (Fig. 1). The photograph blurs the line between documentary and fashion photography with its focus on the visual and the employment of heavily stylised poses, highlighting the *Sapeurs'* predilection for posing, which forms an intrinsic part of *La Sape*, and is inevitably influenced by their travel to Europe and awareness of a range of photographic images and practices. However, Tamagni's insertion of these photographs of the *Sapeurs* into a photo-book, arranged in no meaningful sequence of events and without a configurative structure to isolate significant images, threatens to undermine the agency of his subjects and instead puts them up for aesthetic appropriation by a European audience. The wide circulation of

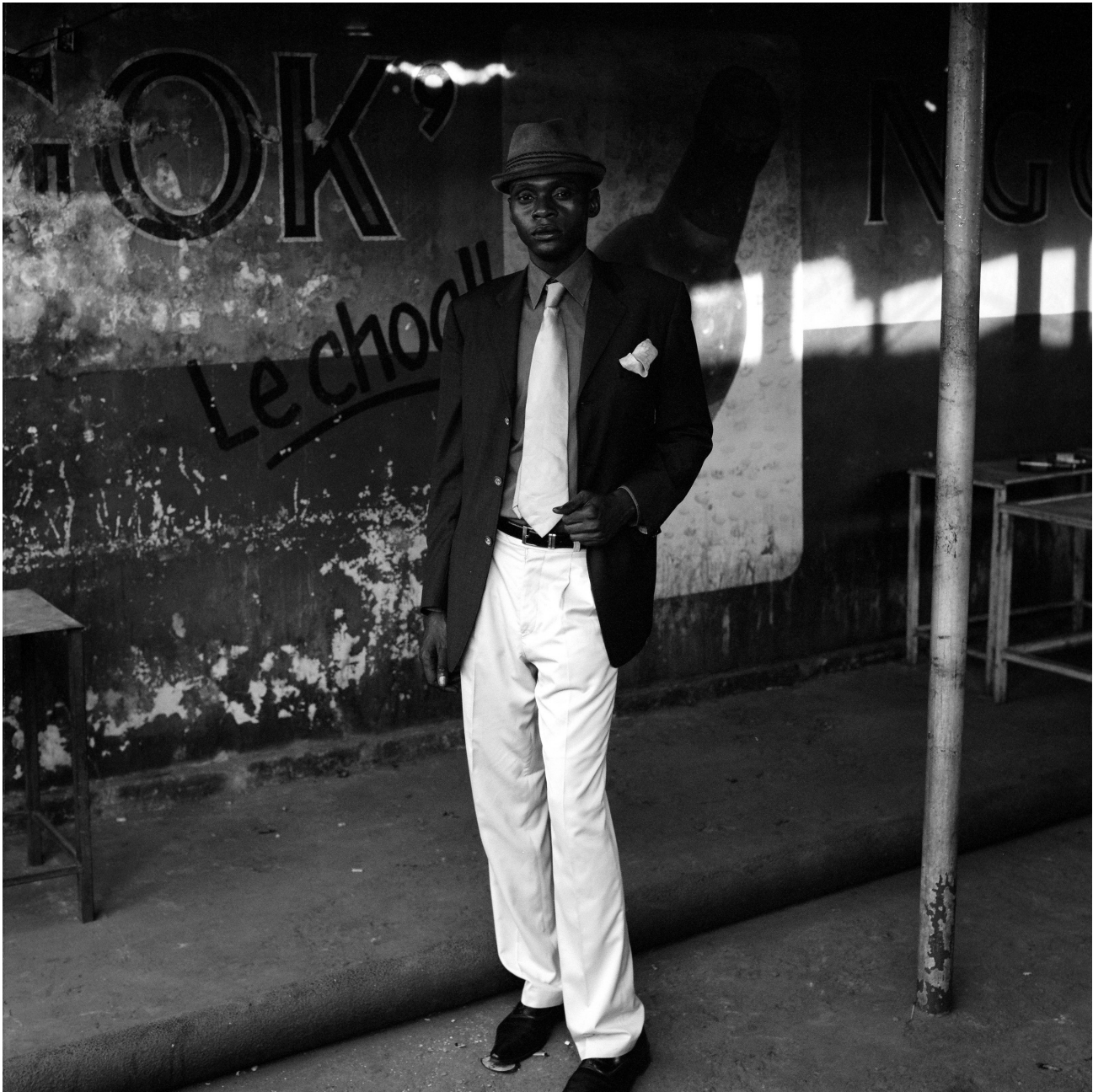


Fig. 2. Francesco Giusti, selected image from *Sapologie*, 2009. Colour photograph. (Photograph: Courtesy of Francesco Giusti).





26. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 108.

27. Pinney, *Camera Indica*, 31.

28. Rose, 'Book Review: Gentlemen of Baongo', 440.

29. Tamagni, *The Gentlemen of Baongo*, n.p.

his photographs, through the photo-book and gallery display, but lack of any explicit or engaging material to accompany them, is at risk of reducing the *Sapeur* to a vehicle for the aesthetic, thousands of miles away from the actual identity of the subjects. As Edward Said writes on the subject of the native 'other', dehumanising the subject is a way of enabling us to gain control over it.²⁶

By contrast, the less widely circulated work of Giusti represents cultural difference by making the subject, the *Sapeur*, the focus of his study, in a style reminiscent of nineteenth-century anthropological photographs. Photographing the *Sapeurs* one-by-one, isolated in bright and evenly lit spaces, his work serves as a reminder of the historical trading links between the two cultures, and the implied zeal of Westerners throughout history to impose their tastes and sense of decorum onto colonized indigenous peoples. The twist in Giusti's series is that the binary opposition inherent to anthropological photographs, between what was considered 'superior' in the nineteenth century (the look and shape of the Western European face and body) and what was considered 'inferior' (the look and shape of any other type of face and body), has become blurred. Giusti's role in the image-making process is relatively passive, and the resulting photographs can be viewed more as collaborations that reflect the choices of the individual *Sapeur*, who chooses his own props, settings, and styles of presentation. The *Sapeurs'* expressions, gestures, and poses, often with their bodies twisted slightly to one side and away from the photographer (Fig. 2), demonstrate an agency in self-fashioning before the camera, which becomes an imaginative space through which they can stage fanciful versions of themselves. Giusti's work presents the *Sapeur* as neither fragile nor static in the face of a European gaze, but able to transform outside influences to his own ends. There is nothing casual or unengaged about Giusti's photographs; instead they have a quiet intimacy and naturalism that seems to stem from the photographer's deep knowledge of the sitters, who are clearly willing and equal participants in the image-making process.²⁷

Tamagni became interested in the *Sapeurs'* distinctive style and modes of self-presentation on a research visit to Brazzaville in 2006–7, building up relationships with them and recording their process of transformation from informally dressed at home into their public personas.²⁸ Tamagni's photo-essay begins with a clear statement emphasising his collaboration with the *Sapeurs*: 'Arca, Lalhande, KVV Mouzieto, Lamame and Hassan Salvador are just a few of the Sapeurs I met in Brazzaville [...] they taught me to know the difference between a real *Sapeur* and a simple elegant man'.²⁹ Many of the less obviously staged photographs in *The Gentlemen of Baongo* are endowed with the signs



of intimacy and authenticity between photographer and subject—blur, off-kilter composition, and a ‘snapshot’ aesthetic—which suggests these images appear more by happy accident than calculated design (Fig. 3). Here the subject seems to have forgotten the presence of the camera and composition is casual. It is a mark of the photographer’s authentic connection to the *Sapeur* which allows him to photograph them from a supposedly informed, albeit outsider’s, perspective. Charlotte Cotton notes that ‘the use of seemingly unskilled photography is an intentional device that signals the intimacy of the relationship between the photographer and his or her subject’.³⁰ A clear example of Cotton’s assertion can be seen in the image documenting the highly ritualised process of a *Sapeur* getting dressed in a shirt, pair of chinos, and bow tie in front of a mirror at home (Fig. 4).³¹ The apparently unselfconscious, day-to-day nature of the photograph seems to confirm the idea that we are looking at a spontaneous moment in the life of the subject, reiterating that these are real people and real life situations that Tamagni is documenting. The *Sapeur*’s reflection may be blurred but the photographer’s close viewpoint, from directly behind his subject, engenders a closeness and intensity, the photographer assuming the role of mediator. Yet it cannot go unnoticed that the layout of Tamagni’s image on the page appropriates the three colours that make up the Republic of Congo flag. The *Sapeur*’s shirt is yellow, the room which is reflected in the mirror is green, and a block of red has been inserted on the bottom half of the page, an example of the photographer’s aestheticisation of the *Sapeur* in the subsequent editorial process. There is a close resemblance between this image and ‘ethnographic’ fashion shoots produced by British photographer Corinne Day in the 1990s. Day’s ‘documentary’ style photographs of her model friends came to exemplify the direct and personal approach of the ‘grunge’ aesthetic in fashion photography, providing the antithesis of the glamorous and exotic locations of mainstream fashion shoots. Such a comparison between Day and Tamagni draws attention to the crossing over of the two genres within Tamagni’s work, as heavily stylised fashion poses and performances play out in an environment that references a documentary tradition.

In another of Tamagni’s photographs, three *Sapeurs* wearing Western-style suits, brogues, panama hats, and sunglasses pose amidst a rubbish heap, their ostentatious attire at odds with the violence, degradation, and urban poverty of their surroundings (Fig. 1). Photographs such as this alert us to the *Sapeurs*’ inventive use of mimicry, through clothing, posture, and other external signifiers, to conjure aspirant new identities that reject European influence. The Congo has a long history of Belgian and French colonization, which included the imposition of

30. Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 137.

31. It is important to note that there is a difference between Western and Congolese understandings of the self; whereas in the West we often understand outer appearance to be superficial by comparison to the inner being, in the Congo there is not such a rigid distinction between inner and outer self, therefore outer appearance is often understood to be instrumental in fashioning the inner being.

Overleaf:

Fig. 3. Danielle Tamagni, selected image from *The Gentlemen of Baongo*, 2009. Colour photograph. (Photograph: Courtesy of Daniele Tamagni).

Fig. 4. Danielle Tamagni, selected image from *The Gentlemen of Baongo*, 2009. Colour photograph. (Photograph: Courtesy of Daniele Tamagni).







32. Remy Bazenguissa and Janet MacGaffey, *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

33. Gondola, 'La Sape Exposed! High Fashion among Lower-Class Congolese Youth: From Colonial Modernity to Global Cosmopolitanism', in Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran, eds., *Contemporary African Fashion* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 162.

34. Gondola, 'La Sape Exposed!', 162.

35. This is an idea used by Julian Stallabrass to discuss photographer Richard Billington's work. See Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (London and New York: Verso, 1999).

36. Stallabrass, 'What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', *October* 122 (2007), 71–90.

European dress on the Congolese by Colonial officers and missionaries as part of their 'civilising' mission.³² In spite of this, seen here the *Sapeurs*' appropriation and transference of Western tailoring, customised and fashioned to their tastes, shows selectivity and creativity in adapting foreign cultural material and fashioning it for use in a profoundly different context. Gondola has asserted that *La Sape* is a movement laden with 'powerful political symbolisms and ideologies' that play out dramatically in the post-colonial era.³³ Dressing elegantly is understood to be 'a revolutionary act, seemingly compliant at times—because it borrowed its paraphernalia and lexicon from the colonizers and because of its proclivity for aesthetical [sic] display—but nonetheless inherently subversive'.³⁴ Making clear the contradictions of *La Sape*, by juxtaposing the brightly-coloured, conspicuously clothed Sapeurs against a crumbling backdrop of Brazzaville's detritus and ruinous buildings, Tamagni encourages their Western tailoring to shine out even more brightly, the connotations perhaps that 'real' fashion can emerge from anywhere, even a developing country such as the Republic of Congo.

Yet even with the broken-down machinery, debris, foliage, dirt, and general disorder, there is an overall aesthetic quality to the photograph, which would have been brought into contrast with the minimal, white walls of the art gallery and more generally, the polished surface of the coffee table.³⁵ In the case of Tamagni, representations of the *Sapeurs* came to be presented, specifically through the single-authored book (or photo-book) and gallery exhibition, as subjective expression rather than objective documentary: a montage of gestures, expressions, poses, clothing, and colour individually selected and grouped according to Tamagni's schema. The overall photo-book with its explicit, rhythmic ordering of images and recurring motifs offers a celebratory 'poem' in photographs of the *Sapeur* movement, oscillating precariously between, as Julian Stallabrass has observed in contemporary art photography, 'identification and distancing, honouring and belittling, critical recognition and enjoyment of the spectacle'.³⁶ Flipping through the book we are presented with a subject that, through the discourse of garish, fanciful advertising, is reduced to a series of spectacular images, disregarding their role as active persons, through the loss of the individual's desires and expressive self-presentations. Photographs of the *Sapeurs* are interspersed with close ups of polished shoes, coloured socks, shiny cufflinks, and fat cigars, reiterating the visual and literal consumption so fundamental to fashion, and to what Deborah Root would argue is a European audience's appetite for the 'other'. Root asserts that 'the process of exotification is another kind of cultural cannibalism: that which is deemed different is consumed', suggesting that such highly



aesthetic images feed particular cultural, social, and political needs of the appropriating culture.³⁷ Menswear designer Paul Smith's preface to Tamagni's photo-book—'Their attention to detail, their use of colour [...] is just fantastic'—reinforces an expectation that many viewers (not solely a designer who is, of course, inspired by colour and pattern) will respond to these images through the aesthetic, detracting from the individuality of the *Sapeur's* varied and complex interactions with the values and institutions of Western culture.³⁸

In a reversal of Tamagni's mode of representation, documentary photographer Giusti photographed a small community of *Sapeurs* from Pointe-Noire over a short period of time in May and June 2009.³⁹ Giusti takes the highly photogenic subject of the *Sapeur* and depicts him in a uniform series, always one per frame, and usually placed centrally in the picture, facing the camera and gazing directly into the lens. Compositional effort on the part of the photographer is reduced, and variability in the resulting photographs rests on the particularities and peculiarities of the subject and his immediate environment. Giusti has made little comment on his work except that it was 'a search for the right portrait of each *Sapeur*; one capable of capturing each person's peculiar style and own way of declining elegance. The visibility, embodied by their excesses in dress, is a form of resistance'.⁴⁰ It is interesting that Giusti uses the term 'portrait', when in many ways Giusti's images are visually akin to ethnographic photography of colonised people in controlled situations; the *Sapeur* is represented straightforwardly and with little apparent intervention by the photographer. Yet, herein lies the crucial point of confrontation: Giusti's technique of documenting the *Sapeur* operates as a sophisticated and self-reflexive commentary on photography's former use as an observational and recording tool for European exploration and documentation of the Congo. His images draw attention to the fluctuating nature of anthropological photographs. Here, as Elizabeth Edwards has consistently emphasised, whilst they are meant to record facts, meanings move about them and shift over time: they are active, unfixed images, not passive bearers of fixed, anthropological evidence.⁴¹ A clear example of this can be seen in Giusti's photograph of a *Sapeur*, named KAMASUTRA, standing outside a bar, the subject remaining very still and his eyes meeting the camera's lens, showing little or no activity other than self-presentation (Fig. 2).⁴² Knowing the names of the *Sapeurs* shows that Giusti obviously takes care to get to know his subjects, and wants viewers to know that the *Sapeurs* are real people not simply exotic fare. There is a quiet, intimate theatricality in this photograph of an urbane and well-dressed *Sapeur*, his European-style tailored suit and matching trilby in varying

37. Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation and the Commodification of Difference* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 127.

38. Smith, 'Preface', *The Gentlemen of Baongo*, 3.

39. 'Sapologie', <http://francescogiusti-photo.viewbook.com/sapologie> (Accessed: 30 July, 2013).

40. 'Francesco Giusti', http://www.photostoryweekly.com/francesco_giusti (Accessed: 30 July, 2013).

41. Elizabeth Edwards, *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 3-17.

42. Francesco Giusti informed me of the *Sapeur's* name, which is written in upper case, in an email exchanged 31 July, 2013.



43. Charles Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1846', in *The Mirror of Art*, trans. J. Mayne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), 116–20.

44. Francesco Giusti informed me of the *Sapeur*'s name, which is written in upper case, in an email exchanged 31 July, 2013.

45. Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October* 28 (1984), 126.

46. Bhabha, 'Mimicry and Man', 126.

shades of green and grey instilling the subject with a self-constructed elegance that references Baudelaire's figure of the nineteenth-century dandy.⁴³ Yet dandyism, no longer associated with the pavements, arcades and commercial displays of modern urban centres, now unfolds outside the worn façade of a bar in Brazzaville, where the subject stands out, at least in the eyes of a Western audience, in stark contrast to his surroundings. Giusti's use of natural sunlight filtering across the image, rather than the bright lights associated with modern culture, disrupts the conventional Western understanding of the dandy as a European man-about-town.

Another example can be seen in *Sapologie* (Fig. 5), in which Giusti photographs a *Sapeur* named GUY RETRO' BIAPASSOU leaning idly on his stick, pipe in mouth, with one hand resting on his hip in a performative pose which serves to emphasise his foppish demeanour and comic ingenuity.⁴⁴ Dressed head-to-toe in an outfit constructed entirely from materials bearing the American flag, and paired with a Ralph Lauren red shirt, the *Sapeur*'s masquerade of European tailoring is brought to life through Giusti's distancing of himself from the subject, which presents the *Sapeur* in a more measured and contemplative manner. Homi Bhabha points to mimicry as a hybridizing process which 'emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal', undermining the authority of colonial representation mimicry by bringing to light the ambivalence of colonial discourse.⁴⁵ The gap of ambivalence—the *Sapeur* is 'almost the same, but not quite' in his imitation of European style—is a site of resistance and the movement of resistance arises at this very point that colonial authority in fashion can be seen to interact with 'indigenous' cultural practice.⁴⁶ The *Sapeur*'s highly staged and artificial pose is compounded by the group of onlookers, crowding around, whose apparent lack of familiarity with his behaviour and that of the photographer lends an air of theatricality to the scene. By focusing so intently on the subject, and minimising the use of editing processes for aesthetic purposes, Giusti's images play an important role in providing evidence of 'trans-culturation', by centring on the *Sapeur* as a highly performative and self-constructed product of the physical exchange, customisation, and reinterpretation of Western goods to an indigenous design. The widely circulated work of Tamagni, which blurs the line between documentary and fashion photography, is at risk of reducing the *Sapeur* to a series of spectacular images, disregarding his role as an active person and instead putting him up for aesthetic appropriation by a European audience. The lesser-known Giusti's work engages more consciously with the politics of representation, self-reflexively incorporating within



Fig. 5. Francesco Giusti, selected image from *Sapologie*, 2009. Colour photograph. (Photograph: Courtesy of Francesco Giusti).





47. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 102–3.

Sapologie, an acknowledgement, and critique of, the uneven power relations enacted by and through representation.

Here I have examined some of the problems and tensions of the representation of the *Sapeur*, as demonstrated in the work of two twenty-first century Italian photographers, Daniele Tamagni and Francesco Giusti. I return to Ortiz, whose statement that ‘transculturation’ carries with it ‘the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena’, is crucial to a more nuanced understanding of the *Sapeur* movement, which involves the adaptation and re-writing of European tailoring to an indigenous design.⁴⁷ Inherent within this complex process of cultural transference is the agency of the subject culture to select and invent from materials passed on to them by a dominant culture. By addressing the subtle shifts and nuances of *La Sape*, Ortiz’s theory allows for the *Sapeur*’s display of Euro-African fashions to be understood as a subversive and socio-political action aimed at both the authoritative structures of the Congolese state and the former colonizer, enacted when the subjugated peoples take up the aesthetic codes formally associated with the dominator. Yet the *Sapeur*’s clothing acquires a further level of meaning when the photograph detaches the *Sapeur* from his original context, displacing the subject temporally and spatially, and inserting him into diverse contexts where he remains open to new interpretations. It is intrinsic to *La Sape* to wish to be photographed, but this creates difficulties, because in wishing to display themselves, they ultimately give something of themselves to the photographer. A *Sapeur* may believe that he is the one using the photographer to put forward certain images of himself, but he can end up being used by the photographer. Representation emerges as a complex cultural process; the *Sapeur*’s style functions as his vehicle of resistance to the West, but its close associations with the aesthetic unearths problems and tensions when the camera’s lens fixes fluctuating conceptions of culture and identity.